

SIMSBURY

Genealogical and Historical Research Library

Volume 13 Issue 3

Fall 2006

The Simsbury Free Library

The Original Trustees: Part 1

During the winter of 1872 and 1873, there was organized among the middle aged and young people of this village a social and literary club. This society, prompted by its needs, agitated the matter of a public Library. There had existed for some years an organization known as the "Simsbury Book Club," owning at this time about one hundred and twenty volumes. Learning that these would be given to any new organization, it was decided to accept them, change the plan of the Library, making it fixed rather than circulating, and add to it by every means possible.¹ From entertainments given for the purpose, and by subscriptions, several hundred dollars were raised. During the summer of 1874 the subscription paper was presented to Mr. Eno for his consideration. Of course the soliciting committee talked over the matter, and hoped that Mr. Eno's name would go down for fifty dollars, and a few were so bold as to suggest that he might give one hundred dollars. The surprise, therefore, was as great as it was delightful, when he returned the subscription paper with the proposition to give three thousand dollars (\$3,000) to establish a Library for the citizens of Simsbury—one-half for the immediate purchase of books, and the balance as a fund to provide for future growth.

From the speech given at the 1890 building dedication by John B. McLean²

Amos Richards Eno, the library's benefactor, was a Simsbury native who had amassed a great fortune in New York City real estate. That he and his family spent the summer and many holidays at their home on Hopmeadow Street, now the Simsbury 1820 House, and that he made many generous gifts to the town and its people are a well-known part of the history of Simsbury. Mr. Eno declined to have the library named after himself, choosing instead to call it the Simsbury Free Library. He had a Deed of Trust drawn up in which he named ten trustees. These ten men in accepting their appointments agreed to serve unpaid and to be responsible for the operation and welfare of the library. The trustees immediately secured the second floor of the Hop Meadow District school and began to fill it with books. At first they opened the library just a few hours a week when the school was not in session. These ten original trustees are the subjects of the following series of brief biographies.

Horace Belden, 1845-1931

Horace Belden was the grandson of Thomas Belden (sometimes spelled Belding), born in 1761, probably in England. Thomas Belden lived in Wethersfield and then Hartford and became very successful as a manufacturer of blocks, pumps and so forth, and also in the West Indies trade. He and his first wife, Mehitable Harris, had seven children. The fifth was Horace Belden, born in 1793, who became the father of Simsbury Free Library trustee Horace Belden. As a young man Horace Belden Sr. participated in the West Indies trade, at one time going as supercargo, that is, the ship owner's representative in all transactions regarding the cargo. His father also sent him to oversee a woolen mill

in Agawam, Massachusetts.³ When Thomas Belden took possession of a gin distillery in settlement for a bad debt, he put his son in charge. The distillery was in Simsbury on Hop Brook.

Horace Belden Sr. moved to Simsbury, where during 1853-55 he built a brownstone mansion that stood conveniently close to the distillery on the southwest corner of what are now Hopmeadow and West Streets.⁴ He and his wife, Selina Fowler, had five children, the youngest of whom was Horace Jr.

Horace Belden Jr. was sixteen when his father died in 1861 and he was forced to leave school. After completing the lower grades in Simsbury he had gone to the Pavilion Boarding School in Hartford and Mr. Smith's Select School in New Haven. His older brother ran the distillery for a year, but it burned down. Horace Belden rebuilt it and operated it until 1870, then leased it.⁵ Historian John E. Ellsworth wrote, "The distillery produced an excellent gin and was pecuniarily profitable for many years." He added that Mr. Belden eventually closed down the distillery "owing to scruples of conscience."⁶

Belden was twenty-four in 1869 when he represented the town in the state legislature. He was a Democrat.⁷ When he was twenty-nine, Amos R. Eno appointed him to the original board of the Simsbury Free Library. He would serve on the board until his death in 1931, more than fifty-seven years. That record was only surpassed by George Chester Eno, who was twenty-one when he was appointed and who would serve for more than sixty years.⁸

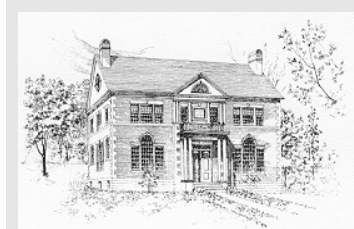
Throughout his life Horace Belden was known for his financial acumen. For awhile, he and another library board member, Ralph Hart Ensign, were trustees of the town's sinking fund.⁹ Mr. Belden was elected to be the library board's treasurer (and de facto investment manager) from 1876 until he resigned the post in November 1920. The next treasurer was the Simsbury Bank and Trust, which had opened three years earlier.¹⁰

His many financial interests included an early water company. Historian John Ellsworth says,

In 1868 an act was passed incorporating "The Simsbury Water Company." By 1872 water was being supplied to stockholders on a basis of one three-quarter inch connection for every five hundred dollars worth of stock. The water was taken at first from a reservoir on Branch Brook and later from the running brook above. It was led through iron pipes along the same route as the old log pipes of several decades previous. The leading spirit in the enterprise was Capt. Lucius G. Goodwin, followed by Horace Belden and at his death his management had conserved the tidy sum of some twenty thousand dollars, the income from which is used to maintain the system.¹¹

An 1894 *Hartford Courant* article says of Belden and the water company, "One of his worthy beneficences was the building of a special reservoir right at the mouth of a spring, and having the water carried in pipes to the houses, so that it is effectually protected from any foreign accretions." Many years later he used the machinery of his long-idle distillery to produce electricity for his own home.¹³

He became the chief stockholder of the Tariffville Lace Company, organized in 1899, and remained an officer in the company through its various transformations until his death.¹⁴ His 1931



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obituary in the *Farmington Valley Herald* says, "During the recent months when the urge has been made to give employment Mr. Belden has done much for others. Last year the buildings of the Tariffville Lace Company were refinished, shingled and placed in excellent condition."¹⁵

Along with his business dealings, Horace Belden kept up the family farm. The 1870 federal census lists a farm laborer as well as a servant living at the same address as Mr. Belden and his mother. A biography published in 1919 mentions that he "still continues to run the homestead farm."¹⁶ A lifelong bachelor, he and his mother, Rachel Selina Fowler Belden, lived together in their mansion until she died in 1899 at the age of ninety-two.¹⁷

The Simsbury Game Club was one of Horace Belden's recreational interests. Its membership included many of the leading men in town in 1894 when Horace Belden was elected president. Other library trustees who were members were Ralph Hart Ensign, George C. Eno and William H. Whitehead. That year the club unanimously adopted the resolution, "That if any members be found guilty of violating the Sabbath day by fishing in any of the leased waters of this association he shall be immediately expelled therefrom."¹⁸

When the Congregational Church needed to be repaired and redecorated in 1883 Horace Belden headed the fundraising committee and pledged most of the \$3,000 they raised. The church history by Lyman Potter says that Mr. Belden "favored stained glass windows and frescoes, and in fact had the Italian workers work inside his house across the street while they were here working on the church. A society vote authorized the installation of beautiful [stained glass] cathedral windows together with a memorial window dedicated to deceased pastors and a brightly painted ceiling."¹⁹ Mr. Belden also established a fund to provide income to be used for the pastor's salary.²⁰

Besides being treasurer of the Simsbury Free Library board, Mr. Belden was elected to the position of Librarian in 1907 to replace Trustee Aaron L. Eno, who had died.²¹ Being the elected Librarian required him to oversee the day-to-day operation of the library, but not to be the staff person who met the public. According to one account, the library was staffed at first by Trustee George Chester Eno, but after a few years the board hired Miss Eliza J. McRoy, who held the position until her death in 1913.²² Mr. Belden continued to be the elected Librarian until he resigned in 1920 and George C. Eno took his place.

Upon accepting his resignation from his two offices, the library board passed a resolution that said, in part, "We wish to thank Mr. Belden for his personal care and service which have been most faithful and painstaking and for his many and large contributions to the furnishings and running expenses of the library which added much to the efficiency of the institution."²³ He may have given up his posts, but Mr. Belden continued to attend every board meeting.

Encouraging and facilitating learning was a quiet passion of Mr. Belden's. When it came time to build the first public high school in Simsbury, which cost about fifty-five thousand dollars, he contributed forty thousand.²⁴ This grand brownstone building on Hopmeadow Street now serves as the Simsbury Town Hall. He also gave generously toward building grammar schools.

Antoinette Eno Wood chose Mr. Belden to serve on the committee responsible for erecting the Eno Memorial Hall after her death. The building memorializes Mrs. Wood's parents, library benefactor Amos R. Eno and Lucy Jane Phelps Eno. One of the last public acts of Horace Belden's life was spreading the mortar to lay the corner stone of that building.²⁵

Even after death, he went on giving to the town. He left a bequest to the town of a \$100,000

trust fund, the income of which was “to be devoted and expended by it in making good roads within the limits of said town and the repairing of the same.”²⁶ The *Farmington Valley Herald* explained, “Mr. Belden’s gifts during his life were prompted in part by his desire to keep the town out of debt and taxes low. He recalled often the experience the town had with railroad bonds and the indebtedness incurred at that time.”²⁷ Former Connecticut Governor and U. S. Senator George P. McLean said of his friend, “Mr. Belden was held in the highest esteem by his fellow townsmen. He was a very modest, retiring man of means. He never let his right hand know what his left hand was doing, but both hands were generally busy giving to the town or to his less fortunate neighbors.”²⁸

Rev. Charles Pitman Croft, 1844-1921

Rev. Charles P. Croft was descended from James Croft, a farmer, who emigrated from northern Germany and served in the New York Militia during the Revolutionary War. Rev. Croft was the fourth generation. Son of Matthias and Maria (Chapman) Croft, he was born in Putnam County, New York. His parents were Methodists so they sent him to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

Upon his graduation in 1869 he was called to be the minister of the Simsbury Methodist-Episcopal Church.²⁹ On April 19, 1871, he married Julia Mather, daughter of Col. William and Emma (Phelps) Mather and granddaughter of Deacon William and Anna (Lewis) Mather. Their wedding was in the Congregational Church where she was a member, but “the beautiful and impressive service of the M. E. Church [was] used.”³⁰ Julia Croft had two brothers, William Clayton Mather and Civil War General Thomas S. Mather, who had been the Adjutant General of Illinois and who was severely injured at Vicksburg.³¹ About two years after they were married, Julia Croft’s aunt, Sarah Mather, deeded to her the old Deacon Mather homestead in the Weatogue section of Simsbury.³²

In those days Methodist ministers were expected to change parishes every three years, but when it was time for Rev. Croft to leave Simsbury he changed denominations and was ordained a minister at the East Avon Congregational Church, where he served for about two years. After he left the church in Avon, he did mission work at Warburton Chapel for the Center Church of Hartford. Then he supplied pulpits in Torrington and Watertown, Connecticut.³³

In 1874, when he was 30, Amos R. Eno named Rev. Croft to the Board of Trustees of the Simsbury Free Library. He was immediately made Vice President of the board and was elected to this position almost continuously until after 1889. He also served on the Book Committee in 1874, the unsuccessful Building Committee in 1875 and as Secretary in 1876. Although the record in the board’s minutes is sketchy, it is likely that he held his seat until his death in 1921. In 1906 he served with Horace Belden and others on the Town of Simsbury’s building committee for the first high school.³⁴

In 1884, because of poor health, Rev. Croft resigned from the church in Terre Haute, Indiana, where he had been pastor for about four years.³⁵ He had remained active on the board of the Simsbury Free Library even when he was living out of town and was usually at the August annual meeting. In retirement he and his wife returned permanently to their home in Simsbury. He was much sought after to preach in churches throughout Hartford County and beyond and to perform weddings, christenings and funerals.

Countless items in local newspapers detail Charles Croft’s close association with members of the Dodge family, whose wealth originated with the Phelps-Dodge Company. Rev. Croft was particularly close to Rev. D. Stuart Dodge, who had been the first professor at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut, later called American University, and with whom Rev. Croft often shared a pulpit.³⁶

Soon after leaving Indiana, according to one account,

He accepted an offer from Rev. D. Stuart Dodge to look after his boys in Columbia, S. C., during the winter and at Simsbury during the summer months. He gradually became business advisor to Dr. Dodge and remained with him for nearly thirty-five years. During [these] years...Mr. Croft made two trips abroad. The first trip was made with Walter and Frank Dodge and the party visited England, France and Italy, spending the winter in a villa in San Remo, Italy. The second trip was made about 1900, with Marcellus Hartley Dodge and Frederick Keppel of Columbia University. They spent several months in Egypt and the Holy Land, and visited all the capitals of Europe. He also visited Canada, Panama, West Indies and South America.³⁷

An article in 1908 said that Mr. Croft had visited Mr. Dodge's son Frank at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, where he was recovering from an operation and "Mr. Croft also paid a visit to his friend Marcellus Hartley Dodge of Tarrytown on the Hudson and christened his boy Marcellus Hartley Dodge, Jr., at the home of Mr. William Rockefeller, father of Mrs. Dodge."³⁸ Another paper had this to say about Mr. Croft:

For many years he had charge of the extensive interests of the Dodge Families who owned a great many acres of land west of Weatogue in the Bushy Hill District, where were erected...three fine houses and later a fourth, the estates comprising more than a thousand acres. As the families occupied these homes in the summer only, the entire care of the property devolved on Mr. Croft. He was a sort of guardian for Hartley Dodge, who when the war broke out, was a principal owner of the big Remington Rifle factory in Ilion N.Y. and during the war was with the young man continuously as his advisor.³⁹

Charles Croft was involved with too many organizations to list them all. He and his wife, along with John B. McLean, Ralph Hart Ensign, Antoinette Eno Wood, D. Stuart Dodge and many other Simsbury people were charter members of the Connecticut Forestry Association.⁴⁰ Julia Croft became the first Regent of Simsbury's Abigail Phelps Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.⁴¹ He was president of Simsbury's Republican Club in 1900 during George P. McLean's successful campaign for governor.⁴² However, what probably most endeared Charles and Julia Croft to Simsbury people was that they opened the Neighborhood House on Canal Street in West Weatogue.

In 1905 they appealed to Julia Croft's cousin, Antoinette Randolph Phelps of Hartford, to give them the three-story house, known as the Mather-Phelps Homestead, which she had inherited some years before. Miss Phelps immediately saw the benefit of the project and the Crofts had the place remodeled to suit the needs of a community center. First floor interior partitions were removed to make a meeting room that could seat about 150 persons, the kitchen was modernized, small meeting rooms were furnished, so forth.⁴³

After the Neighborhood House's gala opening on November 8, 1905 it was the place for many types of gatherings, including lectures, whist parties, and dinners. In October 1906, the *Hartford Courant* reported, "The entertainment was mostly musical. The singing was by English, French, Germans, Swedes and Italians in their several languages....At the close everyone sang the 'Star Spangled Banner.' The affair is the first of its kind in the history of the town and so much interest was manifested that Rev. Charles P. Croft, who planned the entertainment, is already planning evenings of the same character."⁴⁴ He also supported the movement to give women the vote. When Rev. Charles Pitman Croft died in 1921 he was eulogized as "one of the first men of Simsbury."⁴⁵

By Mary Jane Springman

Notes

1. The books of the Union Library, described in the Summer 2006 newsletter, were so few that almost all were in circulation among the members. By a fixed library John B. McLean probably meant a library that would have a building to contain the book collection.
2. *Report on the Proceedings at the Dedication of the Simsbury Free Library, January 28, 1890* (Hartford, Conn.: Press of The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1893), 7. The \$3,000 the Amos R. Eno contributed in 1874 would be worth about \$46,226 today. See <http://www.westegg.com/inflation> Mr. Eno added to this amount later, including land for the 1890 Simsbury Free Library building, until his contribution totaled \$20,000 or about \$395,000 in today's dollars.
3. Samuel Hart, et. al., comp., *Encyclopedia of Connecticut Biography...* 10 vols. (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1917-[23]), 6:293.
4. *Ibid.*, John E. Ellsworth, *Simsbury: Being a Brief Historical Sketch of Ancient and Modern Simsbury, 1642-1935*, (Simsbury, Conn.: The Simsbury Committee for the Tercentenary, 1935), 156. This mansion was taken down and recently replaced with the Hopmeadow Place condominiums.
5. Hart, 293.
6. John Ellsworth, 128.
7. <http://www.cslib.org/conngares.asp> 11/8/2006.
8. *Original Minute Book of Trustee's Meetings of Simsbury Free Library, 1874-1944* (photocopy in the Simsbury Free Library), *passim*.
9. *Statement of the Receipts and Expenditures of the Town of Simsbury For the Year Ending September 30, 1886; with the Annual Report of the School Visitors*. (Hartford: Elihu Greer, Printer, No. 16 State Street, 1886), p. 3. See also reports of 1887 and 1888.
10. John Ellsworth, 169.
11. John Ellsworth, 167-68. The Village Water Company was incorporated in 1903, Ellsworth says.
12. *Hartford Courant*, August 10, 1894, 3.
13. Obituary of Horace Belden, *Farmington Valley Herald*, October 22, 1931.
14. John Ellsworth, 167.
15. Obituary of Horace Belden.
16. Hart, 6:293-94.
17. Evan W. Woollacott, *The Gavel and the Book: The Simsbury Town Meeting, 1670-1986*, (Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishing for the Simsbury Historical Society, 1987), 111-16. In the section of his book devoted to Horace Belden, Evan Woollacott relates the reminiscences of Belden's niece, Josephine Pomeroy Hendrick, and his grandnephew, James Pomeroy Hendrick.
18. *Hartford Courant*, March 29, 1887, 4.
19. Lyman G. Potter, *A History of First Church of Christ at Massaco, Simsbury, Connecticut* (Simsbury, CT: First Church of Christ, 2002), 63-64. After the stained glass was shattered in 1892 by an explosion at the Ensign Bickford Company, it was replaced by clear glass and the frescoes were painted over.
20. Obituary of Horace Belden. In his book John Ellsworth writes on page 156 that the fund amounted to \$25,000.
21. *Original Minute Book*, 79.
22. Obituary of Eliza McRoy, *Farmington Valley Herald*, Nov. 21, 1913. The newspaper states that George. C. Eno preceded Miss McRoy and that she had been the librarian for forty years, which must be a slight exaggeration. At the time of her death the library had only been open thirty-nine years and the minutes of the Board of Trustees show that George C. Eno was co-librarian with Trustee John B. McLean in 1874 and librarian in 1875 with Trustee William Whitehead as his assistant. Since she is never mentioned, it is impossible to determine from the board's minutes just when Miss McRoy was hired.
23. *Original Minute Book*, 88.
24. John, Ellsworth, 156.
25. Obituary for Horace Belden.
26. John Ellsworth, 156
27. Obituary for Horace Belden.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Commemorative Record of Hartford County, Connecticut: Containing Biographical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens...* (Hartford: J.H. Beers & Co., 1901), 592. Hart, 7:29-30. Obituary of Rev. C. P. Croft, *Hartford Courant*, November 16, 1921.
30. *Hartford Courant*, April 24, 1871. Deacon Mather had been the librarian of Simsbury's Union Library.
31. *Hartford Courant*, November 29, 1890, 6.
32. Abigail Eno Ellsworth, comp., *A Record of the History of Some of the Old Homes of Simsbury, Connecticut*, (Simsbury, Conn.: Abigail Phelps Chapter, NSDAR, 1936), 229. This house still stands at 332 Hopmeadow Street, but the Crofts greatly altered its appearance by, as one newspaper said, adding on in every direction.
33. Obituary of Rev. C. P. Croft, *Hartford Courant*, November 16, 1921.
34. Woollacott, 72-73.
35. *Hartford Courant*, November 26, 1884, 3.
36. Phyllis B. Dodge, *Tales of the Phelps-Dodge Family: A Chronicle of Five Generations* (New York: New-York Historical

SGHRL Updates

Our librarian Allison Krug has made improvements in our computer technology. We now have high speed Internet access and the library is wireless so that you are able to access the Internet with your own laptop. However, you will not have access to the library version of Ancestry.com except on the library's own computer.

Jean Perreault is anticipating releasing her book on the Simsbury records in the 1930 Federal Census early next year. In addition to the census she has gathered information from many other sources. The text will include birth, marriage and mortality facts for town residents and also parental identification. Jean is a professional genealogist who lived in Simsbury for forty years. Many of you have met her at SGHRL when she has substituted for our librarian and as she has done some of her research at the library. Look in the next newsletter for the announcement of her book's publication.

Celia Ann Roberts, reference librarian at the Simsbury Public Library, is always helpful and a great supporter of SGHRL. Besides donating two books that bear the Simsbury Free Library nameplate and are autographed by William Phelps Eno, she has called our attention to the wonderful resource now offered on the public library's Web site (www.simsburylibrary.info) through iCONN. Called the "Historical Hartford Courant," this site allows you to search all the articles published in the *Hartford Courant* from 1764 to 1922. You need a valid library card number from any public library in Connecticut to use the iCONN databases.

Some Recent Acquisitions

The Genealogist Companion and Sourcebook by Emily Croon (donated by Jean Douglas)

Generations: The Journal of the New Brunswick Genealogical Society, six issues, 2004-2006

The New England Historical and Genealogical Register, 2002-2006 by the New England Historic Genealogical Society (donated by Frank Pinney)

New York in the Revolution as Colony and State by James A. Roberts (donated by Frank Pinney)

Simplification of Highway Traffic by William Phelps Eno (donated by Celia Ann Roberts)

The Story of Traffic Control by William Phelps Eno (donated by Celia Ann Roberts)

Society, 1987, 144.

37. Obituary of Rev. C. P. Croft, *Hartford Courant*, November 16, 1921.

38. *Farmington Valley Herald*, September 25, 1908, 1.

39. Obituary of Rev. Charles P. Croft, *Farmington Valley Herald*, Nov. 17, 1921, 1. Most of the extensive Dodge properties were acquired by purchase or gift by the Ethel Walker School.

40. *Hartford Courant*, December 31, 1896, 4.

41. John Ellsworth, 172. The chapter was organized in November 1893.

42. *Hartford Courant*, October 2, 1900, 8.

43. *Hartford Courant*, November 8, 1905, 13. The one negative thing the long article had to say about the building is "the house is located in the center of the little village, a stone's throw from the Weatogue station of the Northampton division and so close to its tracks that a few inches more would have made it necessary to sidetrack the building whenever a train passed. In one sense the house had the right of way, for it was there before a railroad was ever thought of, as it was built about 100 years ago by Dudley Pettibone."

44. *Hartford Courant*, October 13, 1906, 17.

45. Obituary of Rev. C. P. Croft, *Farmington Valley Herald*, November 17, 1921.

New England CONNECTIONS 2007
26-29 April
Hartford, Connecticut

This exciting event for genealogists will be held at the Hartford Convention Center. Many well-known, well-versed speakers are scheduled to address a multitude of genealogical topics. For more information and to register, please go to the conference Web site (<http://www.nergc.org>) or come into SGHRL to get a brochure.



The series *The Simsbury Free Library: The Original Trustees* begins in this issue of the newsletter, which features brief biographies of Horace Belden and Rev. Charles Pitman Croft. Biographies of Alonzo G. Case, Aaron L. Eno, George C. Eno, Amos F. Eno, Ralph H. Ensign, John B. McLean, Rev. J. Logan Tomlinson and William H. Whitehead will follow.

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